

A short how-to guide on searching ancestors in the Netherlands

How to start the research

Most people know the full names of their parents, grandparents, and maybe also of their great-grandparents. In many families, oral tradition does not reach back more than that. Also, exact places and dates of birth, marriage and death are not often known.

Start with the living people

- The best place to start is with you. Write down your full name. Where were you born? Where were you married? Which dates?
- Then proceed with your 2 parents. Where were they born? Where were they married? Where did they die (if applicable)? At which dates?
- Then do the same with your 4 grandparents, 8 great-grandparents, and so on, as much as you can find.
- Look up old photographs in family albums to get more names and dates. You might also have some newspaper articles, diplomas, obituaries, invitations to wedding parties, etc.
- Talk with the oldest members of your family. How much do they know that you didn't? Can they recognize family members in old photographs that you don't? Write their names and what else is known about them on the back of the photographs.

Public records and non-public records

Then you're ready to do the first research at the archive. But not all records are public, to protect the privacy of living Dutchmen. Birth records need to be at least 100 years old, marriage records at least 75 years, and death record need to be at least 50 years old.

This means that your Dutch ancestor needs to be born before 1910, married before 1935 or needs to have died before 1960.

There are also population registers in the Netherlands, where you can find what people lived at the same address as your ancestors. These registers are public up to 1940.

Linking the generations together

By looking up records, one finds new information which enable us to link together the generations. In Table 1 (on the next page), one can see which information can be found in the Dutch records. From the table, it follows that marriage records give us the most information.

By looking up marriage records alone, it is often possible to make a quick family tree for a person going back to the period (just) before 1800, in just hours, if the data are available in the GenLias index database (<http://www.genlias.nl>).

Table 1: information found in the civil registry.

	Always found	Sometimes found
Birth	Name of the Child Names of parents (if known) Names, profession and place of residence of witnesses (usually 2)	Profession and address of the father (sometimes one of the witnesses).
Marriage	Name, age, place of birth, place of residence and profession of Groom. Names, profession and place of residence of Groom's Parents (if known) Name, age, place of birth, place of residence and profession of Bride. Names, profession and place of residence of Bride's Parents (if known) Names, profession and place of residence of witnesses (usually 4)	Profession and address of brothers and uncles (sometimes witnesses). If parents are both deceased, sometimes the names of the 4 grandparents are given.
Death	Name, age, place of birth, place of residence and profession of Deceased. Name of Spouse of Deceased (if any) Names, profession and place of residence of Parents of Deceased (if known) Names, profession and place of residence of witnesses (usually 2)	Profession and address of a son (sometimes one of the witnesses).

Church books versus Civil registry

Civil Registry

The State of the Netherlands have registered information on birth, marriage and death of its subjects for two centuries. This system was imposed by French law, as Napoleon Bonaparte ruled over the Netherlands. For the provinces of Zeeland and Limburg, the law was implemented in 1795, the rest of the country followed in 1811. Since then, every **birth**, **marriage** and **death** is recorded in the Civil Registry. As can be seen in Table 1, one can learn quite a lot about the life of people by using this registry alone.

The law enabled the rulers to find their subjects when they were needed: to be soldiers, and to pay taxes. Information about people had been stored for this purpose for centuries, but never as centralized and as detailed as with this law. It also prescribed that everybody had to choose a **surname**, if they did not have one already.

The marriage records are accompanied by *huwelijkse bijlagen* (annexes to the marriage record). The annexes contain copies of the records of birth (baptism) of bride and groom, a record about the military service of the groom (sometimes with a physical description of the groom!) and copies of the death records of the parents of bride and groom, if they were already deceased.

Where to find the information

The records are ordered geographically. The municipal archives have a copy of their own administration. A copy lies at the provincial archives. The larger cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, the Hague, Delft, Dordrecht, Nijmegen, etc.) have their own archives and often no or limited copies are available at the provincial archives.

Table 2: information found in the church books.

	Always found	Sometimes found
Baptism	Name of the Child Names of parents (if known)	Birth date Names of witnesses Address of the parents.
Banns	Names of Bride and Groom (The banns had to be published 3 consecutive times in church or at the city hall, at the place(s) of residence of Bride and Groom. If no objections were raised by anyone, they would get a marriage license)	Marital Status (widow(er), unmarried) Date of marriage Places of Birth or Residence Names of Witnesses
Burial	Name of the Deceased	Date of Death. Place of Residence. Name of witness.

Church books

Before the civil registry law, the church had the task of administering the people living in the parish. This worked reasonably well, because most people were religious. The state favoured the Dutch Reformed religion. Marriages there were legally binding. Other religions could marry in their own church, but also had to do a civil marriage at the town hall. Other religions seen in the Netherlands are: Roman Catholic, Remonstrant, Mennonite, Jewish.

As seen in Table 2, the church books do not yield as near as much information as the Civil Registry does. It is much harder to link the generations together, because names of parents only are found in records of baptism.

Records of baptisms and publishing of the banns can start as early as 1580 and as late as 1790, depending on which parish your ancestors lived in. For Dutch Reformed people, there's a good chance of finding a lot, but for the other religions it might vary. It was not before 1806 that it became mandatory for churches to record deaths, for tax reasons. Most parishes therefore have very limited records on deaths or burials, although there are exceptions.

Where to find the information

The records are ordered geographically. Most of the time, the only copy made lies at the provincial archives. The larger cities (Amsterdam, Rotterdam, Delft, Dordrecht, Nijmegen, etc.) have their own archives and often no or limited copies are available at the provincial archives.

Surnames and patronymics

In the old days, people used *patronymics*. In Latin, the word *pater* became *father* in English. The Latin word *nomen* means *name*, so a patronimic is a “father’s name”, people were named after their father. For example, if a father named **Peter** had a son **Hans**, the son would be referred to as “Hans Peterszoon” (Hans, son of Peter). Often, Peterszoon would be abbreviated: Petersen, Petersz., Peters. Now if this son **Hans** would have a son named **Jan**, then this grandson of Peter and son of Hans would be named “Jan Hanszoon” (Jan, son of Hans).

Jan’s sister Maria would be called “Maria Hansdochter” (Maria, daughter of Hans), which would be abbreviated to Hansdr, Hansen or Hans.

Some given names are popular in a specific area, in a given time. In the old days in the Netherlands, many boys were called Jan, Pieter, Cornelis and many girls were called Grietje, Maria, and Jantje. In areas where there were many people, like in the larger cities, it became likely that there were several people with the same given name **and** with a father who had the same given name. So there would be several people called “Pieter Janszoon” or “Jan Corneliszoon”.

In order to distinguish those people, they were given nicknames like *Bakker* (baker, profession), *van der Woude* (of the woods, a location), *van Rijswijk* (of Rijswijk, a town), *de Vries* (the Frisian,), *de Lange* (the long one, appearance), etc. These **nicknames** could become heritable and were passed on to the younger generations, and thus became **family names**.

This happened rather early (17th century) in the provinces of Noord-Holland and Zuid-Holland. In the rest of the Netherlands it varied, in most rural areas people still used patronymics only up until 1811.

Lastly, I want to name one large group of family names, the so-called **petrified patronymics**. In 1811, many people had to choose a surname. If for example “Hans Peters” (Hans, son of Pieter/Peter) had to choose a name, he either could invent a surname like “van Dalen”, “Wieringa”, etc., but many people chose their patronymic for a surname. In this way, “Peters” became a surname which would be passed on to future generations. Now Hans’s son Jan, who would be called “Jan Hanszoon” in the old system using patronymics, was called “Jan Petersen”, because he had inherited the surname Petersen from Hans, his father. Because the patronymic did not change any more from father to son, we speak of a petrified patronymic. In the 19th century, also a hybrid system was used, yielding names like “Jan Hanszoon Petersen” (Jan Petersen, son of Hans Petersen).

Naming your children

In many families, a strict naming system was used. This sometimes enables us to find the correct parents of a person, by looking at the names of his children. The method does not give a 100% confidence level, but can be quite useful from time to time.

A very popular naming scheme was the following:

- Name of first son = Name of wife's father.
- Name of second son = name of husband's father.
- Name of first daughter = name of husband's mother.
- Name of second daughter = name of wife's mother.

From my own research, I have found the following example:

Jacob Roodbol married on 2 October 1770 in Oud-Beijerland, Zuid-Holland, with **Wouterina Stek**.

Children, all baptised in Oud-Beijerland:

1. Jacomijntje, 30 August 1772.
2. Cornelis, 7 November 1773.
3. Pleun, 26 August 1775.
4. Anna, 3 November 1776.
5. Jacomijntje, 19 November 1777.
6. Teuntje, 20 June 1779.
7. Pleun, 17 June 1781.

If Jacob and Wouterina used the popular naming scheme, then one would guess that Jacobs parents were called Pleun (second son) and Jacomijntje (first daughter), and that Wouterina's parents were called Cornelis (first son) and Anna (second daughter).

And indeed, through other sources I was able to prove that Jacobs parents were **Pleun Jacobsz. Roobol** and **Jacomijntje Abrahams van der Sluijs**, and that Wouterina's parents were **Cornelis Stek** and **Anna Willems de Zwart**.

In those days, it was considered to be very important to have your children named after one of its grandparents. Therefore, child 1 and 5 were both called Jacomijntje and child 3 and 7 were both called Pleun. The first Jacomijntje and Pleun must have died at a young age, and when another child was born it got the name of the grandparent who now was "missing".

Finding out more about your ancestors

If you have exhausted all the oral history of your family, the photographs and old family albums, the civil registry and the church books, then the work need not be over. For many genealogists, the work then has just started! There are many other sources which can be explored in search of more information about the life your ancestors lived.

Population records

In the Netherlands, we don't have census record like e.g. in the U.S.A. A census is a "photograph" of one moment in time, at which we know which persons lived at which address. The Dutch have population records. These records are continuous, so not just a snapshot in time, we can see where a person lived at any given moment in time. Most municipalities have population registers available from the 1850's on, the system was discontinued in 1940.

The records show where your ancestors lived, where they moved from, where they moved to, what their profession was, and who else lived in the same household.

In 1940, the system was changed. The records were not ordered house-wise, but person-wise. Every Dutchman got a personal archive card (*persoonskaart*), with all information about birth, marriage, death, spouse and children on it. It also has the information on profession, and the addresses where a person has lived. The cards become public 3 years after a person has died.

Notarial records

If your ancestors owned money and/or real estate, it is very likely that they appear in the notarial records. There one finds records of buying and selling goods, land, houses, etc., but also testaments, and inventory lists made up after the death of a person.

The notarial records from before 1811 are usually referred to as "Old Notarial Archive (ONA). The records are ordered geographically, so you have to know in which municipality a record was made in order to find it back.

There is an index on the testaments, which is kept at the Central Bureau for Genealogy (<http://www.cbg.nl>) and the National Archive in the Hague. All Dutch testaments made between 1890 and 1973, by persons who have died before 1973, can be looked up in that register. For the period 1806 - 1927, the provincial archives have *Memories van Successie*, records made up for tax reasons: people had to pay tax over an inheritance. The *memories* tell us whether a testament was made.

Of the other notarial records, few (if any at all) indexes are available. If one finds something, the rewards are great, but one has to be willing to invest quite a lot of work to do the find.

Judicial records

In the post-1811 period, judicial records are almost exclusively tied to law-breaking and punishment. Before 1811, this also made up an important part of the judicial records, but because the system of law was different back then, the mayor (sheriff) and aldermen also did work that now would be done by the notariat.

Mayor (Sheriff) and aldermen

Towns and villages were governed by a *Burgemeester* (Mayor) or *Schout* (Sheriff), together with the *Wethouders* or *Schepenen* (Aldermen). As said, before 1811 their function was not only to uphold the law and to judge the guilty, but they also provided other valuable services to the community:

- They had the power to join people in marriage. During large parts of the 17th and 18th century, the only legal marriage could be performed in the Dutch Reformed church. People of other religions (Roman Catholics, Dutch Isrealites (Jewish people)) could have a civil marriage with the Sheriff and Aldermen.
- One could make up ones will (testament) with the sheriff and aldermen. If a person died, the sheriff and aldermen often were the persons who witnessed the making of an inventory list of the possessions of the deceased, if they didn't make the list themselves.
- The sheriff and aldermen could also make official records of transactions: buying and selling of real estate, lending and borrowing money.
- In bankruptcy cases, they lead the auctioning of goods to raise money. These records, though the origin is sad, is a very rich source of information about life in the past. It is recorded what
- Community taxes. Sometimes, people of two villages shared the costs of making a paved path between these villages. Or money was raised to build a new town hall. This sort of community services, being paid by the villagers, resulted in lists of people who had to pay or donated money, giving information about the wealth of certain people.

Care for orphans (weesmeesters)

People died young in the 16th and 17th century, children as well as adults. So naturally there were a lot of widowers, widows, and orphans. If one of the parents died, the so-called *weeskamer* (orphan's chamber) made sure the children would inherit from the deceased parent. If both parents died, the inheritance was sold, the money was put aside and the children were raised by relatives or friendly neighbours, or in an orphanage. This process was accompanied by a lot of administration, so if your ancestor lost on his/her parents, there is hope that one can find more information about this at the archives. In periods where there are no death or burial records left, this is one of the few sources which enables us to estimate a date of death.

If people did not want the *weeskamer* to be involved with the upbringing of their children, they could make a testament where the *weeskamer* was excluded. In the testament, guardians were appointed who were relatives or close friends, they were then responsible for raising the children. This system became so popular in the 1700's, that the *weeskamer* shrank into a marginal institution.

Court of Holland

The Court of Holland was the court of appeal. If one thought that some local judge's ruling was mistaken or wrong, one could appeal at this court. Indexes have been made for parts of this vast archive. The records are kept in the Hague.

Dike reeves, polders, water management

We don't have to tell you that water management has been an important issue in the Netherlands, for many centuries. Dikes and water pumping windmills have been built, and much work has been done to ensure that people kept dry feet in the polders, and that in spite of that ships could find their way through the maze of rivers, canals, and smaller streams.

All of this activity has left many traces in the archives. From management (dike reeves) to the workers (people who made dikes, carpenters, millers etc.), we can find traces of our ancestors, if we're lucky.

Church (management) records

In the 17th and 18th century, if your ancestors were members of the top or middle class of a parish, it is possible that they have been elder, administrator, or church warden of the local church. Often this was unpaid work, but this kind of "community service" added to the prestige of the person and the family he (yes, it was always a "he" in those days) belonged to.

So next to the books in which marriages, baptisms and funerals were kept, we often also find records of elections of elders, new priests, etc., records about the finances of the church, and so on.

Sometimes, the priests made lists of *lidmaten* (church members), so he knew how many "souls" there were in his parish. Some of these lists also give information about the part of the village where these people lived.

Another type of church records is the so-called *kerkeraadshandelingen* (minutes of the meetings of the church board). These usually are thick volumes, filled with reports on meetings. If your ancestor was the priest of that church, then these books give a unique insight into the daily life of the parish, seen through the eyes of your ancestor and the other members of the church board. But one also can find very interesting "human interest" stories in these books: reports on drunkenness in public, fighting, births of illegitimate children and the ways in which they were pressed (sometimes even during labour) to name the father.

Impost records

At the end of the 17th century, the Dutch had fought some wars (with the English, the French, the Germans) which ended in disaster, financially speaking. The state was in dire need of cash. Therefore, it was decided in 1695 to have an *impost* (tax) on marriages and burials.

One's wealth was assessed, and one was put into one of 4 categories. The poor (4th class) did not have to pay anything, while the very richest (1st class) had to pay 30 guilders for their marriage or burial (in the case of burial, needless to say, the heirs had to pay the money).

Sometimes, marriage and burial registers were not kept, or not well kept. It could also be that they were lost in a fire, a flooding, or due to other reasons. In that case the impost records are a valuable supplement to the church books we already have heard about.

Other tax Records

Impost was not the only tax that was imposed on the Dutch citizens. Below we present to you 2 of the most common taxes.

10e penning etc.

There were a whole series of taxes called *10^e* (*20^e*, *40^e*, *100^e*, *200^e*, *500^e*) *penning*. This was a tax of 10% (5%, 2½%, 1%, ½%, 0,2%), usually on real estate.

A penning was a coin (with a small value, the word has the same root as the English penny). So the name “20th penny” (*20^e penning*) meant that of every 20 pennies, you paid one in tax (i.e. 5%).

The (rental) value of the house and/or land was estimated by an official, and the user of the land or house had to pay the appropriate percentage of that estimate value in tax. These tax registers give insight in the wealth of your ancestor, if he or she wasn't poor: people who didn't own anything don't show up in this kind of records.

Because these tax registers start already in the early 1500's, long before church books were kept, often it is the best source of information about your ancestors in the 16th century.

Haardstedengeld, familiegeld

In the 17th century, money was raised by the Dutch state, e.g. to finance wars. There were several systems in use, all designed to share the burden in a fair way.

In some places tax was raised according to the number of persons (adults, children and servants) were living in the household. This was called *familiegeld* (family money). So the larger households, with many servants (and so probably the richer households) had to pay more than the smaller ones.

Another system was the *haardstedengeld* (fire places money). The more fire places your house had, the more money you could spend on wood or peat, and the more you could pay in tax, was the general idea.

The registers give insight into the wealth of our ancestors, and in the case of the *familiegeld* also one can see how large the household was.

Medieval times

Memorial Records

In medieval times, it was considered important to say prayers for the dead, and to continue doing that year after year. By doing this, God and the Saints were asked to save the soul of the deceased, and the deceased was remembered by friends and relatives.

In the 15th and 16th century, it was fashionable amongst the rich to pay the church to hold annual sermons (called *eeuwige memorie*, eternal memory) for a deceased person. The church would get a piece of land (called *memorie land*), and would rent that out. The rent money then was used to pay the priest for doing the sermon.

The land was administrated well, and many of these books are still available at the archives. If one is lucky, one can follow the family from the years 1400 on, most books end somewhere in the 1700's.

Leenregisters

Another medieval type of record is the *leenregister*, which sat at the heart of the feudal system. For sake of simplicity we neglect the fact that the church owned land, and we state that the king (or emperor) owned all the land in a country. Large pieces of land then were given to the king's trustees, the dukes, barons and other noblemen. In return, these vassals of the king could give parts of their land to other people, who would actually use it.

The people who took the land on loan had to pay rent, and pledge allegiance to their Lord, in a ceremony in which they put their hand palms together, and put them in between the hands of the Lord, while kneeling. This was called *hulde doen* (doing the honours).

Naturally, it was carefully administered who had taken which piece of land on loan. In many cases, the right to use the land was given from father to son. Therefore, one can often estimate a date of death for a person by looking at these registers.

Many registers start in the (late) 1400's, and the system was abolished when the French took over the power in the Netherlands in the periode 1795 – 1800, since the French revolutionaries were much against feudalism and nobility.

Collections of coats of arms

If your ancestor had a coat of arms, especially if he or she was part of the nobility, it could be worth looking into the books of coats of arms which were made in the 1400's and 1500's. By following the evolution of the coats through the generations, one can find back generations of ancestors, even if no records of birth or marriage have been made. The Central Bureau for Genealogy (<http://www.cbg.nl>) has some of these books available, some have even been digitized and are available through websites.

Military records

If your ancestor was a soldier, it can be difficult to find him back at the archives. Soldiers travelled a lot, and children were born wherever the regiment was located at that particular point in time. Before 1795, the military record is not very complete, but especially when your ancestor was an officer, you have a good chance of finding him back. The records are kept at the National Archive in the Hague.

After 1795, records are almost complete, and also ordinary soldiers have left traces. One can find descriptions of how one looked, place and date of birth, names of parents, ranks and salary, and the battles your ancestors has fought in.

Also these records are kept at the National Archive in the Hague. The Central Bureau for Genealogy also has some indexes available which makes it easier for you to track down your ancestors who were soldiers or marines.

Other records

We are now at the bottom of a long list of suggestions of archives you can look into. Lists like these can never be complete, although we have presented the most important ones.

But be creative, there is a lot to be found! One of our own ancestors was a goldsmith in Alkmaar, and we found some nice information about him in the archive of the guild of goldsmiths. If your ancestor was a sailor in the 1600's or 1700's, it could be that he worked for the VOC, the Dutch company which regulated the trade with the East Indies (Indonesia), or the WIC, the company which regulated the trade with the West Indies (Surinam and Guyana). We even once researched a family who turned out to be circus artists. We found traces of them in an archive of the municipality who gave the circus a license to set up their tents on their grounds, against a fee.

And so there are many more ideas to explore. It helps if you know the profession of your ancestors, and where he or she lived. Then by looking what records are left in that municipality, it is very likely that you become inspired and maybe you'll do a nice, unexpected discovery.

Final remarks

If you are reading these lines, it means that you have read all these pages above (if you haven't skipped some it. ☺) We would like to thank you for doing that and hope you've found it helpful and interesting. We wish you good luck with finding your ancestors!

© [Family Affairs](#)

September 21st, 2010

Lars and Femke Roobol

The Netherlands